

Teacher perceptions of the influence of a psychotherapeutic counselling course on their identity and practice

Abstract

This paper reports on a project that explored teachers' perceptions of how knowledge and experiential learning gained on a psychotherapeutic counselling programme contributed to their identities and practices as teachers. It seeks to understand the impact such knowledge may have in practice, particularly on their relationships with children. The project employed creative narrative inquiry. Individual, in-depth interviews were conducted with four participants on two occasions each. Stories and images were generated and analysed utilising a framework derived from narrative inquiry and critical narrative analysis. A highly reflexive and ethical stance was taken throughout. Participants identify personal development as being of particular importance in terms of their relationships with pupils. They specifically identify changes in understanding that resulted in altered responses to children. These responses, in turn, led to improved relationships. Teachers reported this to be beneficial and some stories told of increased confidence, satisfaction, empowerment, liberation and wellbeing. Analysis also illuminated conflict and tension between differing approaches in schools to children and to the handling of their behaviour. Findings suggest that in culture where a behavioural approach in schools is dominant, it can be useful to employ alternative understandings. Implications are therefore relevant to current debates about the place of emotional life in education and to the agendas of initial teacher education and teacher's continuing professional development.

Introduction

This research stems from my role as an educator, in a university setting, involved in teaching a programme that prepares people to work therapeutically with children and young people. The course takes four years and is a nationally accredited practitioner training. The majority of students graduate to become therapists, but some remain in their previous professional roles. In my role as tutor I became intrigued by the experiences of teachers who would often relate how their learning on the course was having an impact on their classroom practice and relationships. There is compelling evidence, from a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses, that good teacher/pupil relationships are central to children's engagement in learning and academic attainment (Hattie and Yates, 2014). Similarly, McLaughlin and Clarke (2010), in a meta-analysis of 133 studies, identify school-connectedness, i.e. a sense of belonging to the school, and relationships in school as crucial to both emotional

wellbeing and school attainment. Therefore, exploring potential ways of enhancing such relationships is important. My objective in this study was to explore the impact on classroom practice and teacher/pupil relationships of teachers gaining knowledge from the field of psychotherapy.

This research is set in a shifting landscape of controversy and debate regarding social, emotional and relational aspects of learning. There is a great deal of interest in social and emotional learning (SEL) and it has been described as a new orthodoxy (Humphrey, 2013). Research on the implementation and outcomes of SEL has yielded promising results and also identified problems with the evidence base (Humphrey, 2013); for example, there is a great deal of variability in the quality of studies. There are also views arguing that attention to social and emotional considerations have no place in education (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). These debates have serious implications. If attention to the social and emotion dimension of life has no place, then approaches concerned with emotional wellbeing in education are at best wastes of time and at worst detrimental. However, if there is a place then it is important to establish what that might be; otherwise we will be failing our young people. I am approaching this project with certain underlying assumptions. In particular I hold a view of child psychotherapy that is developmental, integrative, relational and draws on ecological systems theory. This view recognises the centrality of relationships to healthy child development. This is also the theoretical orientation of the course in question

Research design

My approach to interviewing was influenced by narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006, 2007). Narrative inquiry is a methodology used to study and explore lived experience. It views events as being in process and people as having a past, a present and a future. It recognises the social context and the research relationship, as having an impact (Clandinin, 2007). It is an approach that recognises a multiplicity of meanings and that meanings are dependent on context (Etherington & Bridges, 2011). The interviews also included image work. This is sometimes known as creative narrative inquiry (Leitch, 2006). Working with the arts has the potential to facilitate the generation of a richer picture of lived experience than working with words alone. There is the opportunity to gather experience and knowledge that might be otherwise excluded.

The participants were, Rose, Jo, Nia and Sara. Criteria for selection were:

- Still working as a teacher or teaching assistant
- At least 4 years of classroom teaching experience

- Successful completion of a master's degree in child and adolescent psychotherapeutic counselling education

It is notable that all are female, white and British. Teaching is a profession that is dominated by women and, being set in an education faculty, our course draws many students from teaching. Counselling and psychotherapy also has a strong female bias. What is most significant is that they have chosen to attend this course, and therefore are predisposed to an interest in emotional life. So, in many senses, this study is focussed on a particular population. However, they are all individuals working in very different settings. Each participant comes from a school in a different geographical area and from a different cohort of the course.

My intention was to gather stories through in-depth interviews and two interviews were conducted with each participant. The data generated includes notes from my own research diary, a stack of interview transcripts of 118 pages, around seven hours of digital recording and three sets of oil pastel images.

Findings

Personal development

The theme of personal development was evident in all of the interviews. Jo talks about becoming a person, a self and that *'it permeates everything, not just work, but all aspects of life'*. She also talks of developing warmth and uses the metaphor of colour to depict new possibilities. Rose used the metaphor of a straitjacket to explain how she has moved from being *'regimented, severe, heavily-boundaried and grey'*, to *'softer, more colourful and looser'*. Reflecting on the images, of herself before and after the course, that she had created in the interview, she noticed that the second image is bigger, revealing to her a sense of growth and development and announces *'there is more of me – I've grown'*. Nia talked of being *'calmer, more reflective and self-aware'*. She described being *'more conscious'* and *'more emotionally available to be alongside others'*. She referred to herself as being *'warmer, more authentic, as having grown as a person'* and as having *'developed an inner strength.'* Sara also reported personal growth and creates an image of an egg radiating *'warmth and light'*. The image facilitated the revelation of the extent and magnitude of the change in self and she describes the change as being within her.

Changed understandings and different responses

In each case the personal development was accompanied by changed understandings. A key change in understanding was the idea that undesirable behaviour in children can be a symptom of emotional distress and that thinking about

behaviour as having meaning and being a meaningful communication was valuable. A second key change in understanding was the notion that the teacher was not responsible for solving all children's problems. Previously, participants had felt a huge pressure, from OFSTED criteria and school policies, to stop troublesome behaviour by acting. Usually using a behaviourist approach of *'warning one, warning two, and out'*. These new understandings together with personal growth resulted in different responses to children. Participants had learnt through experiential work on the course the value of good listening, good observation and the soothing balm of being understood and attended to. They reported utilising these experiences in the classroom by offering this type of relationship to the children and attempting to talk about and understand troubling behaviour instead of simply acting to stop it. Participants claimed they listened to children more and better, strived to understand their experiences and were more empathic, warm, accepting and authentic.

Better relationships and improved wellbeing

These different responses, in turn, led to feelings of better wellbeing and job satisfaction. Nia describes feeling, *'more empowered, more relaxed, more satisfied and rewarded'*; she says, *'I'm being human, and I'm allowing myself to be human.'* Sara reports, *'It makes it less stressful'*, and *'So it takes that sort of layer of stress off of me'*. She also says, *'Yes, so it lowers the anxiety, It's very empowering'*, and *'My awareness is deeper and richer than it would have been before'*. She goes on to report, *'I think I've got more of a confidence, umm, as a result of what I know'*, and *'I do feel more established', 'I do feel more confident'*.

Jo describes a sense of autonomy, *'It's very freeing'*, and, *'It is liberating'*. She also says, *'I'm a lot more comfortable'*, and, *'It's a kind of confidence'*.

This theme of teacher wellbeing appeared as a golden thread running through the interviews and surfaces sporadically during the telling of particular stories.

Participants also reported better relationships with children and, in some cases, better academic attainment for the child. This is an important theme as there is currently some interest in teacher wellbeing and teacher retention. Klassen and Anderson (2009) in a survey of 210 secondary school teachers report a significant drop in job satisfaction of teachers compared to that reported thirty-five years ago. This is clearly an important issue and it is very interesting that Nia, Sara and Jo are saying how less stressed they are feeling as a result of the knowledge they have gained. Understanding and knowing experientially and theoretically that relational skills are powerful in reducing a child's distress means that teachers will feel equipped and confident, rather than feeling stressed, powerless or trapped

However, there was also a competing version where the personal development and changed understandings led to conflict with other members of staff and the school system and this scenario led to a sense of a culture clash. Three of the participants felt they could manage the clash and that holding a plurality of views was beneficial. Rose found the dissonance too problematic and was planning to leave teaching to become a therapist.

Conclusion

The stories of the teachers in this study suggest that, through their experiences on the course, they gained personal knowledge. This knowledge has enabled them to make well-judged, contingent responses to particular children in particular contexts. Flyvbjerg (2001, 2012), in his books on social science research, refers to knowledge of this kind by the Aristotelian term *phronesis*. This is the practical wisdom that enables people to conduct themselves in an ethical, context sensitive, dialogical and trustworthy manner. It is a situated knowledge that allows a person to understand and act in contextualised settings. It is intimate, local, implicit, tacit, bottom-up and derives from experience and practice. An implication here is that attention to the personal development of teachers is important in developing such knowledge and has the potential to improve classroom relationships, children's behaviour and academic attainment. This has further implications for the agendas of initial teacher education and teachers' continuing professional development. As Palmer (1998) argues, "We often ask the what, why and how of teaching; what curriculum, for what purpose and by what method, but we seldom ask who is the self that teaches". These findings constitute a warrant for exploring teachers' personal development further.

I suggest it is potentially beneficial to adopt a pluralistic approach to working in schools that employs a multiplicity of ways of thinking and responding to children. This study has shown that although there can be tension between behavioural and therapeutic approaches in schools, they can also sit alongside one another favourably. Taking an integrative and relational stance can, through offering alternative understandings, be empowering and liberating and contribute to improved wellbeing and job satisfaction for teachers. Clearly it is neither feasible nor desirable for teachers to routinely undertake a four-year child therapy course. However, I suggest there is potential for further inquiry investigating how teacher/pupil

relationships can be enhanced and how psychotherapy theory and practice can promote such relationships.

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